

Listening to Your Life

Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery it is. In the boredom and pain of it, no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it, because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace.

—Frederick Buechner

A young couple I will call Davis and Linda were members of a congregation I once served. They met after college while serving in the Peace Corps in Guatemala. Love bloomed, and they married upon their return to the United States. As both had been raised in Episcopal households, when they had their first child—perhaps pressured somewhat by both sets of grandparents—they came to see me to discuss the baptism of their newborn son. Adam was duly baptized, and after that Davis and Linda became a regular part of our church community.

When Davis made an appointment with me, telling me he had something he needed to talk about, I hoped it was not something like an upsetting medical diagnosis. He arrived at the appointed hour and moved quickly to the point. “It’s about God,” he said. “God seems so distant . . . like an abstraction. I say I believe in God, but where is he?”


Davis, who was a teacher at a nearby Quaker school, told me he was regularly exposed to the worship that was part of school life. There he experienced the periods of reverential silence. He said that during those times he felt that some force beyond himself was tugging at him. Then, when he came to church on Sunday, the formal language of the liturgy felt stilted and foreign to him: *Our Father . . . Creator of Heaven and Earth . . . Hallowed be thy name . . .*

Davis was struggling and restless in his spirit. He was describing a state common to many. They—we—have a sense something very significant is going on, perhaps under the surface of things—something they might name as life force, energy, mystery, or even coincidence. He longed to connect with some external force he named as *God*, but it eluded him. We sat quietly together. After a time I suggested that his very questioning was a sign that God, who seemed so remote, was the One provoking him to seek God. I told him we somehow get the idea that a relationship with God means we have to strain toward something cosmic and other. Not so. God is close at hand, clothed in the events that constitute our personal history. Frequently the Divine is lurking unseen under the cover of things that seem utterly mundane.

“We seek you, O God, because you have already found us,” observed Saint Augustine. And where does God find us? God finds us in the ebb and flow of our own lives. I told Davis that God is closer to us than we are to our own selves, and perhaps God was inviting him through his very questioning to look for God not in the elevated language of the liturgy but in the immediacy of his own daily life.

Saint Augustine also asked, “How can you draw close to God if you are far from your own self?” For Augustine, self-awareness and knowledge of God are one unified experience. Thus, when we are out of touch with ourselves, it is very difficult to get in touch with God. And, how do we know ourselves? One way is to pay close attention to what is going on within and around us, as I advised Davis to do. We know ourselves by *reading the scripture of our own lives*.

Just as the Bible is a collection of stories recounting human encounters with the Divine, our lives too are a series of stories in which the ordinary has the potential to reveal the extraordinary: intimations of the presence of God. What seasons have we passed through? What joys and sorrows have overtaken us? What accomplishments and failures have we experienced? God has been present in all of this, though possibly hidden and unacknowledged.




Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. It is not in heaven, that you should say, "Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?" Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who will come to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?" No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe. —Deuteronomy 30:11–14

Hearing the intimate word that is already present within us, waiting to be born into consciousness, involves being intensely present to our own lives, intensely present to the events that are daily making us uniquely who we are. Hearing this intimate word means accepting that the hidden treasure of God's intent can be found in the soil of our own existence, in the field of our own heart. If we are not present to our own lives, then we cannot be present to this word.

Sometimes we cannot hear the word because of our own anxieties, our own self-distancing, our own unwillingness to welcome the word as it is present within us. Yet, if we are faithful, the Spirit turns over the soil more and more deeply, and the word finally can emerge into consciousness and be lived in a whole-hearted way.

The word of God planted in all of us is one of creativity and boundless vitality, and appears throughout scripture and in the life of the early Christian community. As recorded in the Book of Acts, it grew and prevailed, confounding a group of ill-prepared disciples who were trying to catch up with it, presenting them with new situations that required their response. The word constantly pulled them forward, expanding their notions of what it meant to be persons of faith, enlarging their previous notions of God's ways, obliging them to embrace something new.



In the Abrahamic tradition, speech is a medium of divine self-disclosure. Therefore, the fundamental stance of the person of faith is to listen. In scripture we read: *Hear O Israel . . . Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening . . . Be it unto me according to your word . . . Hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches.*

The Hebrew word *dabar* means not only word or speech but also event and circumstance. Divine speech, therefore, is not only spoken: it happens. We experience and live the word, in ways both trivial and remarkable.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us . . .

Perhaps the Incarnation—the Word taking flesh in the person of Jesus—is the most dramatic instance of word becoming an historical event. The Divine Word, who spoke creation into being, took flesh in the person of Jesus, and inhabits, as Spirit, the whole of creation, including all of humanity.

A sentence I sometimes say to myself in an effort to remain open and available to God's ever-active word comes from James Finley, who was a disciple of Thomas Merton. "*A simple openness to the next human moment brings us into union with God in Christ.*"



"Obsculta, o fili . . . Listen carefully, my son, to the master's instructions, and attend to them with the ear of your heart." These are the opening words of the prologue to his *Rule for Monks*, written by St. Benedict in the sixth century. The Rule has formed and guided the response of countless men and women to the call of Christ. Taken as a whole, it is about ordered and careful listening: listening with the ear of the heart, the heart being understood not simply as the seat of our emotions but as the core and center of our personhood. What we are listening for is God's word, which comes to us in various forms. Sometimes it is a clear and direct personal address, and sometimes it comes in puzzling disguise. Then again, it can come as a question to be lived without the security of an answer or easy resolution.

In the prologue, St. Benedict goes on to describe the monastery as "a school of the Lord's service" in which the heart,

which at first may be bound by fear, is expanded through careful listening and overflows “with the inexpressible delight of love.” The process of expansion or, more properly, transformation, is accomplished by careful listening: listening to the Abbot who represents the living Word who is Christ; listening to the members of the community with particular emphasis on the elders and the youngest who, in different ways, are bearers of the Word; listening to visitors with their insights and words of criticism as coming from the Lord; listening to the living word of scripture in the context of common prayer woven into the rhythms of the day, the week, the seasons, the feasts and fasts which make up the liturgical year; listening to the word revealed through the labor of one’s hands and the practice of *lectio*, that is meditative reading. In all these ways a listening heart is formed, and conformed over time to the pattern of Christ.

During my years as a student at St. Paul’s School, a boarding school in Concord, New Hampshire, I read a biography of St. Benedict and found myself drawn to him and to his Rule. The Rule gave me a vision of an ordered life, rooted and grounded in patterns of prayer. I was experiencing chaos in my own family life; I understand now that in the Rule I had found a stabilizing and grounding counterbalance. St. Benedict has remained a special companion and friend ever since.

Over the years, I have maintained close ties with monastic communities in both Episcopal and Roman Catholic churches. In fact, members of religious orders have been my most significant guides and wisdom figures. It strikes me as paradoxical that those who have vowed themselves to what can appear to be an extreme and life-denying pattern of existence can become men and women endowed with a remarkable breadth of compassion and the ability to allow for the vagaries of our humanity. Through the depth of their prayer and their struggles with their own unruly natures, they often develop an acute sense of the crooked ways in which God’s grace overtakes and illumines us. Though the monastic life is shaped by rules, it often produces in those who live it deeply a quality of freedom that allows them to look beyond the rules and discover that God’s grace can manifest itself in wild and unexpected ways. The Trappist monk

Thomas Merton is a case in point. While living in one of the most outwardly severe monastic environments, he learned to embrace the world with a cosmic heart and to find intimations of God's grace in places that sometimes strained Christian orthodoxy.



Unsurprisingly, when we read the scripture of our own lives we tend to be highly selective in what we care to remember and bring to consciousness. We easily live with the fantasy that if the Divine is anywhere, it is only in those things we consider positive and filled with virtue. Quite frankly, there are many things I would prefer never to recall: failures, embarrassments, diminishments, things I have done I ought not to have done and can now never undo. However, I have learned that my growth, my more acute shaping, is often born out of struggle and suffering. Reading the scripture of my life involves asking God to reveal to me how life's darker moments and painful memories can at times be transmuted and lead to deeper insight and blessing. The monks and members of religious orders I have known along the way have been incredibly important in teaching me to find and embrace traces of the Divine in unlikely circumstances.

My first experience with a monastic guide occurred at age fifteen when I was at St. Paul's. One of the clergy on the faculty noticed in me a burgeoning spiritual awareness and decided I would benefit from "spiritual direction." I had no idea what he was talking about, but as it would give me special permission to leave school and take the train to Boston for an afternoon, I responded to his urging with alacrity. He sent me off to see the Cowley Fathers, as the Society of Saint John the Evangelist, a monastic community within the Episcopal Church, was informally known. I learned some years later that the Superior of the Society had been appalled that a fifteen-year-old needed spiritual direction and, mercifully, had assigned me to the Rev. Alfred L. Pedersen, SSJE, surely one of the most worldly and sophisticated members of the community. Father Pedersen knew just how to deal with an overwrought adolescent whose newly discovered religious fervor found its outlet in the devotional

practices associated with Anglo-Catholicism. He, so to speak, calmed me down. I said, "Father, I prepare for my confessions for at least an hour." He replied, "Given your tendency toward scrupulosity, I think ten minutes of preparation is quite sufficient." He was patient with me, tempered my rigorous spirit with his gentle good humor, and in many ways became a spiritual father to me.

Another important guide along the way was Father Damasus Winsen, the prior of Mount Saviour, a Roman Catholic Benedictine monastery near Elmira, New York. He was a wise and seasoned monk originally from the Abbey of Maria Laach in Germany. I first met Father Damasus soon after my ordination when I was invited to make a retreat with a group of newly ordained Roman Catholic priests. One afternoon Father Damasus invited me for a walk. Of course, I was flattered that I had caught his attention. As we started off through one of the pastures surrounding the monastery I decided to dazzle him with my grasp of the intricacies of monastic liturgy. I asked a complicated question about the responsories in the monastic breviary. My question was intended to reveal that, though I was an Anglican, I knew more about his liturgical tradition than most Roman Catholics. He saw right through me and my efforts to validate myself in his eyes. He stopped in his tracks, turned toward me, placed his hands on my shoulders, smiled, and said gently: "Oh Franziskus, you are so very, very Anglican." In that moment I felt his compassion in the face of my tortured efforts to justify myself as an Anglican in his Roman Catholic world. I felt exposed, deeply known, and embraced just as I was.

In the years that followed, I continued to go on retreat to Mount Saviour and the friendship between the prior and the self-conscious Anglican deepened. He always addressed me using his mother tongue, as "Franziskus," the German form of Francis. In the evening after Compline he often would say to me: "Franziskus, come to *Casa Abbatiale* but first get a corkscrew from the kitchen." "*Casa Abbatiale*" was a euphemism for a renovated chicken coop that had become his residence, "the Abbot's House," when his cell in the monastery became too filled with books and papers for comfortable habitation. As he

poured each of us a glass of his Riesling, I poured out my soul and stood ready to receive his wise counsel.

Father Damasus's successor as prior, Father Martin Boler, also played a significant role in my life. Father Martin was a medical doctor by training and knew a great deal about both body and soul. Once, as I concluded making a particularly searching and labored confession, rich in self-accusation, he smiled at me and said gently: "Frank, welcome to the human condition." His words, and the way he said them, conveyed divine compassion well beyond the formal words of absolution, which he then pronounced. I later came to understand that I had spent the week of retreat time scrutinizing the history of my sinfulness in a spirit of self-directed judgment rather than by having been led by the Holy Spirit to see my failings in the light of God's merciful love. Father Martin's words made me realize that for my retreats in the future I would need a guide and companion along the way.

The next year, a fellow priest told me of his experience making an eight-day retreat at the nearby Jesuit spiritual center in Wernersville, Pennsylvania. The retreat was structured around a daily consultation with a spiritual director who would listen alongside you to the stirrings of the Spirit and focus your prayer, largely with passages of scripture, for the next day. The structure appealed to me immediately, as I saw that the director would stand as a guard against self-deception or going off in wrong directions.

I signed up for the retreat with some trepidation as I had been led to believe that Jesuit spirituality was harsh and rigorous. In my mind's eye, Jesuits all wore rimless glasses and were possessed of an intensity that admitted no levity. I was in for a real surprise. Peter Foley, the priest assigned to guide me, was a man of my own age with a smiling face, horn-rimmed glasses, and a mustache that looked much like the one I sported in those days.

The eight days were an overwhelming experience during which I was confronted by a sense of my own inner poverty and God's overwhelming generosity and love. The words of Mary's song, recorded in the Gospel of Luke, became the heart of my

prayer. “My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my savior; for he has looked with favor on his lowly servant.” Paradoxically, an awareness of my own “lowliness” became the gateway to gratitude and joy. And so, with a sense of deep blessing the retreat ended, or so I thought.

I went to bed that final night feeling peaceful, and eager to return home in the morning. Then, well before dawn, I awoke and found myself in turmoil, feeling isolated and fearful. Why was this happening to me? Why was the joy and blessing of what I had experienced during my retreat being undermined? I had seen Peter for the last time the previous evening and now was on my own. I prayed fervently that God would explain what was happening. I thought if only I could figure it out and make sense of it I would feel better. I felt anxious that the gifts and blessings of the week would now be lost. I asked God—*why?*—and pleaded for rescue. Finally, exhausted, I gave up my struggle.

At that moment, deep within me I heard a voice: *I am with you in the midst of your suffering. If you try to distance yourself from your suffering you will distance yourself from me. You can only find me in the midst of what you are experiencing.*

With these words, I suddenly knew that Christ was with me in the midst of my turmoil. I had been joined in my struggle, but not rescued. Christ consoled me, not with an explanation for my feelings, but with an infusion of his own confidence and courage. Curiously, I felt that the grace and gift of the retreat had been not only confirmed, but deepened.

So often when we are wounded by suffering or loss we desperately search for an explanation: “Why is this happening to me?” We presume that knowing a reason for it will lessen the pain we are enduring. I find explanations provide little comfort for someone who is suffering. The gift is the companionship of One who himself knew suffering and is therefore able to join us as an intimate friend and companion in the midst of our pain and confusion. Brother Roger of Taizé observed that a wound is the place where Christ is most deeply present.

“The Lord bade me keep my mind in hell and not despair,” declared St. Silouan, a monk of Mt. Athos, in a time of great trial. These words, which urge us to remain steadfast in the

midst of what may seem like Hell, sound extreme, but they have been a rock to stand on that I have shared with others in their times of suffering and severe testing.

This first eight-day retreat led me in the next year to make the full thirty-day retreat according to the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola, and then to be trained in giving the Exercises to others. I had been befriended by Ignatius as I had been by Benedict, and he led me forward as another companion and friend.

During this time I met Father Gary Brophy, who was also on the staff at Wernersville. Gary soon became another wise guide and friend in the Spirit. He could be both tough and tender. His direct and urgent manner owed in part to the fact that his health was compromised by kidney disease, which required regular dialysis. When he was transferred to the Jesuit community at Creighton University in Omaha I began to go there for my annual retreats, as I do to this day. Gary died several years after moving to Creighton, and I was invited to speak at the vigil the night before his funeral. I described him as “the keeper of the secrets of my heart.” This description resonated with many of his brother Jesuits.

I continue to be grateful for these wise guides. They are with me still, beyond this life in the communion of saints.



The gift of baptism is the Holy Spirit. But the Holy Spirit is Christ himself dwelling in the hearts of the faithful.

—Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Carl Jung once observed that “the western attitude with its emphasis on the object tends to fix the ideal—Christ—in its outward aspect and thus robs it of its mysterious relation to the inner man. . . . Too few people have experienced the divine image as the innermost possession of their souls. Christ only meets them from without—never from within the soul.”

I hear these words as an invitation to enter into a deep interior relationship with Christ, which is to know Christ as the truth

that indwells us, the truth not as information or a proposition we can store somewhere, but as something to be lived in an ever-unfolding relationship. This lifelong process depends upon our willingness to pay attention to the ebb and flow of our lives. It is within the circumstances of our lives that the Spirit of Christ meets us.

Our relationship with Christ, as well as being for our own growth and delight, also has social consequences as we are drawn forward beyond our personal experience of God and called to embrace others. The Spirit of Christ at work in us is the agent of God's love, and love, by its very nature, must give itself away.



When confronted by something I would rather avoid than face, I recall the words of the French Jesuit, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin: "By means of all created things, without exception, the Divine assails us, penetrates us and molds us." God may be shaping and molding me even in trying and unwelcome circumstances, and I am forcibly liberated from my efforts at self-construction. As a paleontologist as well as a priest, Teilhard de Chardin saw creation as an ever-unfolding revelation of the Divine, and as a witness to the presence of the cosmic Christ in whom all matter converges and attains its true end. For him all creation revealed the Divine.

Remembering

We are made, they say,
by what we remember
and choose to forget.

Our memories are our treasure,
as well, Pandora's Box.
Within them lies the mystery
of who we are,
and how we came to be.

We release them like ghosts
from long-sealed tombs.
The stone rolls back and out comes
Lazarus smelling like death
or the shade of our mother.

Wanting more
we excavate our plot of time passed
like archaeologists
fingering carefully through the rubble.
Old bowls, broken as promises.
Cloth, woven to last.

Or we wait.
Sometimes we simply wait
as for snowdrops
that withstood cold and the hard frost of winter
and now, improbably, emerge.

We find our memories
or they find us
and attach themselves
like extra appendages.

Better to search, I say
to find what wants to be found
and, of course, what prefers
to remain
hidden.

—Barbara Leix Braver




Dr. Karl Menninger, one of the great pioneers in the field of mental health, once observed that from his perspective a primary cause of mental illness lies in our inability to forgive ourselves for not being perfect. Paul tells us that God's love is poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit. How sad it is when our preoccupation with our imperfections undermines our ability to make room for God's love.

George Herbert was an Anglican country parson who lived near Salisbury, England, in the seventeenth century. Herbert struggled with the tenaciousness of God's love and our unwillingness to welcome it because of our preoccupation with our inadequacies and imperfections.

In Herbert's poem "Love III," we hear Christ's voice. The poem wonderfully captures Herbert's resistance to the unyielding force of Love, who rejects the poet's desperate invocations of his lack of worth. Backed into a corner, the poet's final effort before surrender is his offer to engage in some act of service to justify himself in his own eyes as worthy of Love's attention. Love overrules this final ploy on the poet's part and cuts him off, declaring "you must sit down, and taste my meat":

Love bade me welcome, yet my soul drew back,
 Guilty of dust and sin.
But quick-ey'd Love, observing me grow slack
 From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning
 If I lack'd anything.
"A guest," I answer'd, "worthy to be here";
 Love said, "You shall be he."
"I, the unkind, the ungrateful? ah my dear,
 I cannot look on thee."
Love took my hand and smiling did reply,
 "Who made the eyes but I?"
"Truth, Lord, but I have marr'd them; let my shame
 Go where it doth deserve."
"And know you not," says Love, "who bore the
 blame?"
"My dear, then I will serve."
"You must sit down," says Love, "and taste my meat."
 So I did sit and eat.



In the middle of the last century, Sergius Bolshakoff, a prominent Russian Orthodox theologian, made his way deep into the forests of Finland to a remote monastery that had been established by a community of elderly Russian monks in exile. In his account of the visit he describes his conversations with Father John who, because of his great age and many years of monastic life, was looked upon with particular respect. Before taking his leave, Bolshakoff asked Father John one final question: “How can we find our way in life, Father?” Father John replied: “The very circumstances of our lives will show us the way.” Father John’s years of monastic observance had taught him that the vagaries of life as we experience them are the medium of Divine encounter and revelation.

The very circumstances of our lives will show us the way. These words have become something of a touchstone for me, and a reminder of the importance of attending to the present moment. I know from experience that God addresses us personally all the time, and not just around the edges. As we recognize God’s presence in the events of our lives, we are reading the lived scripture of our own experience. The Spirit blows where it chooses, Jesus tells us in the Gospel of John, and therefore God’s activity is in no way confined to the realm of the sacred. As we accustom ourselves to listen for God’s voice in the midst of the complexities and challenges of the daily, we may find that we are no longer alone. Rather, we are companioned along the way by the One who is more intimate to us than we are to our own selves.

Are You a Michelob Man?

Shortly after I became a bishop I went off for my annual retreat—an extended period of time for prayer and reflection. I headed to Omaha, Nebraska, because Gary Brophy had recently been transferred there. It was important to me that someone I already knew, and who had known me in the past, be my guide and companion as I sought to find my grounding in this new, overwhelming chapter of my life. Anxious that my time in Omaha be fruitful, I took with me several books

of prayers and other resources. Each day I read and prayed. The harder I prayed and the more I read, the more God seemed distant and absent. Day after day nothing seemed to be happening, and I grew more and more frustrated. At this turning point in my ministry I felt terribly in need of a deep sense of God's presence and support. The only voice I heard was that of silence.

One afternoon I walked by a soup kitchen attached to a center for homeless people not far from where I was staying. As I stood in front of the door I remembered some advice of St. Ignatius of Loyola, in his "Rules for Discernment," included in his *Spiritual Exercises*: "When you find yourself in a place of desolation, act against the desolation that has overtaken you." In other words, if you are feeling isolated and depressed, don't shut yourself off from others. Don't allow yourself to become a prisoner of your negative emotions. Instead, do something quite contrary to the way you feel. Make yourself reach out to someone else. Reaching out may require great effort because desolation and self-pity can provide their own dark comfort.

With this in mind, I decided to enter the center and offer to help serve meals. I approached the person who seemed to be in charge and told him I wanted to help. He looked at me and said, "Son, you can help us by sitting down with our other guests and having a big plate of pancakes." In that moment I realized he had taken a measure of me in my old sweatshirt and jeans and thought I was one of the center's guests. This did nothing to ease my feelings of desolation. I went back to my room, feeling God's absence more acutely than ever. I tried to do more reading. I went and sat in front of the tabernacle in the chapel and prayed with some anxiety, knowing there were only two days left before my retreat ended.

The next morning I went to see Gary and told him what had happened the day before. His advice was very simple. "Go back to the center and tell them who you are." So, that afternoon I returned and told the new person in charge that I wanted to volunteer. He said: "You can wash dishes, but if you want to do more you are going to have to talk to Sister Pat."

A few minutes later a feisty-looking woman approached me

at the sink and handed me an enormous soup kettle in need of scrubbing. “Who on earth are you?” she asked. Remembering what Gary had advised, I knew this was my moment. I said: “I am Frank Griswold, the Bishop of Chicago.” Sister Pat was not impressed. She simply said, “When you have finished we can have a cup of coffee.” I scrubbed away and when I was finished Sister Pat reappeared with coffee mugs. We stepped out into the sunny courtyard and she told me about the work of the center and soup kitchen. As we talked I became aware of one of the guests—a man probably in his late thirties—standing near us. He was wearing glasses, but the right lens was missing. There was an eagerness about him, and I sensed that he wanted to enter into our conversation. Suddenly he broke in.

“Are you a Michelob Man?” Surprised by his question, I awkwardly replied, “No, I usually drink wine.”

He said: “You are the man from Chicago with the gift for words.” I was startled. This seemed very mysterious to me but I said nothing.

“This is Patrick Henderson, one of our regular guests,” said Sister Pat.

As Patrick walked away from us, I asked Sister Pat if she had noticed that his glasses were missing a lens.

“Yes,” she said. “At some point I hope we can attend to that.” I told her that I would like to pay for it. “That would be great,” she responded.

That night the encounter with Patrick Henderson stayed with me. I woke up very early the next morning, eager to return to the center to help serve breakfast. Something about our encounter the previous day made me hope I would see Patrick.

Back at the center I was again assigned to washing dishes. Patrick was nowhere in sight. As I washed the last mug the door opened and Patrick appeared. He saw me and with a broad smile on his face, called out: “Frank!” He knew my name, much to my surprise, and my heart filled with joy. He sat down for breakfast and when he finished his coffee and pancakes I followed him out onto the street. I told him I was returning to Chicago the next morning and that meeting him had been important to me.

I remember speaking those words with great feeling and being surprised by the strength of my own emotions.

Patrick stopped and looked at me. Then he said: "Thank you, Frank. Thank you for all you have done." I found myself overwhelmed by his words and turned away with tears in my eyes.

As Patrick walked away from me I wondered why I had been so deeply moved by our encounter. What was going on in me to provoke such a strong response? Then I remembered the parable in the Gospel of Matthew where Jesus tells us that when we serve the most vulnerable and needy we are serving him. "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these . . . you did it to me." I suddenly realized that I had met not simply a homeless man but Jesus. In my desperate search for Jesus in all the books I had brought with me, and in my efforts to stir up my own emotions in prayer, Christ had decided to reveal himself to me in Patrick. Perhaps when I offered the simple gift of having Patrick's eyeglasses repaired this had been an act of service not only to him but to Jesus himself. This event taught me a great deal about God's ability to draw near to us through things that happen to us and people we meet along the way: the daily and the ordinary. It struck me then that in some way my ability to recognize Jesus in Patrick Henderson was the consequence of my seemingly fruitless prayer. God had answered me, though not as I had expected.

Several years after this experience, I preached at a church in Rockford, Illinois, on the Feast of St. Michael and All Angels. I described angels as ministers of God's presence and unexpected messengers, and told them the story of my encounter with Patrick Henderson. After the service a woman in the congregation introduced herself to me. She told me she worked at the homeless shelter sponsored by the parish and that the center had a guest named Patrick Henderson. I asked her to inquire of him if he remembered meeting "the man from Chicago with the gift of words." She called back several days later and, indeed, it was the same Patrick Henderson.

I was eager to see Patrick again and made a plan to take him out to lunch. Some weeks later I met him at the center and

asked if there was any particular place he wanted to go. Outback Steakhouse was his choice, and so off we went. We spoke a bit about how his life had gone since our last meeting. I asked him why he had left Omaha for Rockford, and he told me it felt safer to him.

After lunch I told him I wanted to give him a present as a token of our friendship and asked if there was something he would particularly like to have. He thought for a moment and then responded, "A pocket watch." We scoured the local stores without success. Patrick sensed my disappointment and said, "Frank, the watch really doesn't matter. The real gift is that you wanted to give me one." I left him back at the shelter. That was the last time I saw him. Looking back on the afternoon I have a sense that I had entertained an angel. As the Letter to the Hebrews has it: "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it." (Hebrews 13:2)

Many Patrick Hendersons have appeared in my life, but some I didn't recognize because I was not paying attention and available to their presence.

Across the years I have learned that prayer is an interior orientation of openness and receptivity to God's mystery as it impinges upon our lives. We are drawn out of ourselves into an expanded consciousness that allows us to meet what life sets before us such that we can both receive and respond. I agree with the English mystic Evelyn Underhill that there is no such thing as coincidence; rather, we are seeing God's universe caught in the act of rhyming.

Indeed, the very circumstances of our lives do show us the way.



Some years after my encounter with Patrick, the director of a diocesan-supported shelter for homeless men in Chicago invited me to speak to his guests about my life as a bishop. I thought this an unlikely topic for this particular audience but wanted to lend my support to the work of the shelter. On the appointed evening, after a particularly draining day,

I drove to a depressed area of the city and found my way to the church hall where the meeting was to take place. A dozen or so men sat on folding chairs in a circle and I joined them, filled with misgivings. I started describing to them some of my responsibilities. To my surprise, they seemed quite interested so I went on in some detail about the ins and outs of my days. When I finished one of the men said: "He has a heavy burden to carry. Let's pray for him." They all leapt up and surrounded and hugged me. As they stood in a circle one man prayed fervently that God would keep me safe and support me in my work, and they all replied with a resounding *AMEN!*

Their care and concern for me, when their lives were so unsettled and their futures so unsure, overwhelmed me. Once again, Christ had caught me by surprise and chosen to show up where I did not expect to meet him. What had begun as the fulfillment of an obligation had been transformed into an experience of grace and blessing.



Many questions in our lives do not yield immediate answers. This lesson has not been easy for me to learn. Sometimes resolution is long in coming and we have to go through extended periods of uncertainty and endure the painful burden of not knowing. Sometimes the presenting question is simply a prelude to a further question and prepares the way for a more profound and consequential resolution. Rainer Maria Rilke's words of counsel to a young poet, which have been helpful to many over the years since he wrote them, have been an encouragement to me to live life's questions with patience rather than force answers out of my anxious need for resolution.

Letters to a Young Poe

. . . be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart
and try to love the questions themselves
like locked rooms
and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue.
Do not now seek the answers,
which cannot be given you,
because you would not be able to live them.
And the point is, to live everything.
Live the questions now.
Perhaps then,
you will gradually, without noticing it,
live along some distant day into the answer.

—Rainer Maria Rilke